Journal of the Short Story in English
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

58 | Spring 2012
Special Issue: The Short Stories of Edith Wharton

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Gary Totten

OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1248
ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 June 2012
Number of pages: 143-158
ISBN: 0294-0442
ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference
Gary Totten, « Imagining the American West in Wharton's Short Fiction », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 58 | Spring 2012, Online since 01 June 2014, connection on 03 December 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1248

Imagining the American West in Wharton's Short Fiction

Gary Totten

1 Edith Wharton's work is not generally associated with the themes or images of the American West, and if we were to locate a geographical emphasis in her work, we would most likely identify it as the eastern U.S. We also might consider Wharton in relation to the "Northern," a genre that Leslie Fiedler defines as "tight, gray, low-keyed, under-played, avoiding melodrama at all costs," set in a domestic and sometimes hostile environment in a "mythicized New England, 'stern and rock-bound,' the weather deep winter: a milieu appropriate to the austerities and deprivations of Puritanism." Fiedler deems *Ethan Frome* (1911) the quintessential U. S. Northern novel (16).

2 However, the West plays a significant role in Wharton's work when she uses the trope of travel to or from the West to narrate her female characters' engagement with or manipulation of cultural norms. The issue of marriage and divorce is relevant in this regard. Debra Ann MacComb notes that "[a]lmost from the nation's inception, liberalized divorce laws and the consequent increase in divorces were associated with westward growth" (772), and she situates *The Custom of the Country* (1913) in this context. Indeed, Undine Spragg's journey from the Midwest backwater of Apex to New York evokes comparisons between the wild West and sophisticated East, and her journey West to obtain Dakota residency and then a Reno divorce from Ralph Marvell emphasizes the relationship between unregulated western US spaces and women's increased cultural freedom. In *The House of Mirth* (1905), Wharton explores the relationship between women's social power and western space through the character of Lily Bart who, in order to rehabilitate her diminishing social power, travels with the Gormers to Alaska to take her "out of [her] friends' way" and, as Carry Fisher says, keep "out of their sight till they realize how much they miss you" (379). In both novels, women move to less regulated western spaces to counteract old New York cultural expectations.

3 Here I examine the somewhat different role that the American West plays in Wharton's characterization of female characters in some of her short fiction. In her "Bunner Sisters," the American West announces ominous consequences for the story's female protagonists, and the West is represented as a space of dwindling opportunity, countering some of its conventionally positive connotations in the nineteenth-century American imagination as "a land of infinite possibility" and "a stage" for the country's "important dreams" (Murdoch 24). While my analysis focuses on "Bunner Sisters," I examine the text in relation to other Wharton stories that assign negative cultural associations to the West, such as the crass materialism of the *nouveau riche*, the isolation from polite or fashionable society, or the taint of scandal and illegality. Although she does not analyze "Bunner Sisters," Janet Beer notes how, while Wharton was making the transition from short stories to novels, the novella form allowed her to resolve technical questions and "to order and consolidate subject, language and structure (92),[1] and critics such as Andrew Levy and Scott Emmert observe the correlation between the compact short story form and examinations of enclosed spaces (Levy 65) or determinism (Emmert) in Wharton's stories.[2] Extending these connections between form and content, we might view Wharton's short fiction as a form in which she attempts to aesthetically control social forces that resist regulation, or, as Frederic Jameson asserts about the ideological work of aesthetic form, to construct "formal 'solutions'" for "unresolvable" cultural issues (79). Such control might constitute part of "the sense of authority" that Wharton associated with her writing of short fiction (*Letters* 124). However, within the formal strictures of what Wharton termed the "smaller realism" of short fiction (*Letters* 124), the negative cultural meanings she attaches to the American West, including themes of entrapment, loss of opportunity, and alienation, emphasize the ambivalence with which she viewed the gender norms and expectations of American culture.

4 Although "Bunner Sisters" was written in 1892, Wharton begins by describing aspects of popular culture that establish the story's historical setting as the 1870s, "when New York's traffic moved at the pace of the drooping horse-car, when society applauded Christine Nilsson at the Academy of Music and basked in the sunsets of the Hudson River School on the walls of the National Academy of Design" (166). More subtly, this introduction establishes the story's cultured eastern setting as opposed to the stereotypically uncultured western regions of the country to which Evelina will travel later in the story when she follows her husband to St. Louis, Missouri. Although the Bunner sisters' flat and shop are simple and modest and the street upon which they live is covered in a chaotic "mosaic of coloured hand-bills, lids of tomato-cans, old shoes, cigar-stumps and banana skins" (167), Wharton situates them in an atmosphere containing a degree of civility and order that contrasts with the disarray of both sisters' lives after Evelina returns from the West. The imagery of the squalid street contributes to the story's naturalistic tone, which Donna Campbell and Linda Kornasky have noted, but the story takes an even more naturalistic turn once Evelina travels to St. Louis to begin her married life and then returns alone and broken.

5 Mark Twain's wild west imagery in *Roughing It* (1872) provides a striking literary contrast to Wharton's setting in "Bunner Sisters" and represents a text and set of metaphorical conventions with which Wharton and her readers would have been familiar. Twain characterizes himself as a "young and ignorant" Missourian (19) eager for Far West adventures, and, as in dime Westerns such as Thomas Harbaugh's *Plucky*

Phil, of the Mountain Trail (1881), Twain's narrative is replete with romantic episodes traversing "hostile Indian country" (76), encountering notorious outlaws (87), and enduring extreme weather (273-74). More relevant to the St. Louis references in Wharton's story, during the late nineteenth century Twain also explores the wild and lawless nature of pre-Civil War Missouri in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and represents the Mississippi Valley as western frontier in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883). In the first half of this narrative, which appeared as a series of articles in the 1875 *Atlantic Monthly*, Twain recounts his days as a river pilot before the Civil War, while in the second half he describes his return to the area twenty-one years later. In his 1875 articles, Twain depicts his fellow pilots and river folk as frontier types, but in the second half of *Life on the Mississippi* an obvious change has taken place in Missouri and the Mississippi Valley as it has developed into a burgeoning business and industrial area. Joseph L. Coulombe observes that in the book's conclusion, the train (symbol of industrial culture) heading to Chicago, "carrie[s] [Twain]—literally and figuratively—away from the American West, away from the past of renegade pilots and robust individualism, and toward the future of finance capitalism and personal compromise" (90). While Twain, who admits at the beginning of the second half of *Life on the Mississippi* that he has become distanced from his western persona as "a scribbler of books, and an immovable fixture among the other rocks of New England" (246), might demonstrate a more forgiving attitude toward western mores and manners than Wharton, both writers mine the same cache of western stereotypes.

6 Coulombe's reading suggests that Twain turns away from the frontier past and embraces the industrial future, but vestiges of frontier stereotypes cling to Twain's discussions of St. Louis and Missouri in the second half of *Life on the Mississippi*. As Twain narrates his return to St. Louis from the East in the early 1880s, he observes that, as one travels in any direction away from New York City, "you can get up in the morning and guess how far you have come, by noting what degree of grace and picturesqueness is by that time lacking in the costumes of the new passengers" (248). This decline in the quality of dress and breeding marks the first step in a steady cultural deterioration as he passes westward through regions in which men sport full goatees (a most "obsolete and uncomely fashion") (248), loafers "carry *both* hands in their breeches pockets," and most citizens chew tobacco, before arriving in St. Louis (249).

7 A dime novel such as *Frank Reade, The Inventor, Chasing the James Boys With His Steam Team* (1890) demonstrates how progressive and frontier-like images of the Mississippi Valley coexisted in period fiction. The author of the Frank Reade series, D. W. Stevens (John R. Musick), a native Missourian, combines in his tales the three popular late nineteenth-century subgenres of the Western, science fiction, and detective fiction (Brown 38-39). Pursuing Frank and Jesse James through Missouri, Reade is the quintessential man of ingenuity using his inventions to root out the notorious James brothers who, through their mythologized status as wild West outlaws, seem to defy American progress and technology. The Frank Reade novels were expressly intended for a young male audience, and much dime-novel fiction was, as Bill Brown points out, "an enterprise of men writing for men about men" (32). However, this does not mean that Wharton and female readers would not have been familiar with the genre and its representation of the West. Brown notes the immense popularity of the genre (6), and even negative discussions of the dime novel would have contributed to public awareness of the form. For example, Anthony Comstock's criticism of dime thriller editors for acting as

"Satan's efficient agents to advance his kingdom by destroying the young" (242) or W. H. Bishop's 1879 article in the *Atlantic Monthly* (a forum with which Wharton and her audience would have been familiar) criticizing dime-novel violence suggest the wide-ranging public discourse surrounding the dime novel. By the late nineteenth century, the public's awareness of dime-novel conventions were so well known that, as Brown observes, a novel such as *Frank Reade* could consist of almost pure dialogue because "the staging [had] already been done by the novel's predecessors," creating a mythology of the West that "already exist[ed] as shared knowledge" (33).

8 Both literary and popular writers thus contributed to the frontier image of the American West, and of Missouri in particular, that circulated during the late nineteenth century, but during the period, commentators also emphasized St. Louis's prominence as a Midwestern capital of progress. In 1884, Civil War general John W. Noble, speaking at the Reunion of the Tri-State Old Settlers Association of Illinois, Missouri, and Iowa, referred to St. Louis as the "great metropolis of the Mississippi valley" (*Report of the Organizing and First Reunion* 12), and in his welcome address at the same gathering, Edward Johnstone referred to Illinois, Missouri, and Iowa as "[a]n empire in themselves —nay, each of them fitted to be an empire! . . . [and] strong enough by their moral influence alone to insure for all time, the perpetuity of the Union" (9). Although these remarks were made at an event lionizing the three states in question, other perhaps more disinterested commentators such as Linus Brockett also noted St. Louis's preeminent position as a U.S. urban center. Brockett characterized St. Louis in 1882 as the point of departure for the West (252), a distinction that the city still carries, and observed that by 1880, it had become the largest city in "Our Western Empire" (948).

9 Like Twain, however, Wharton relies on some of the same stereotypes about the supposed lack of culture west of New York City in stories written not long after "Bunner Sisters" featuring western characters or communities that are unrefined or lacking in taste. For example, in "The Pelican" (1898), when Mrs. Amyot's lectures cease to draw audiences in the "critical and [...] exacting" East (84), the narrator promises to recommend her to western universities. Describing the more sophisticated audiences who tire of Mrs. Amyot, the narrator notes that her diminishing reputation is a result of scholarly trends as much as scholarly acuity, since audiences "now demanded either that the influence or the influenced should be quite unknown, or that there should be no perceptible connection between the two" (84). Although she exhausts the interest of her eastern audiences, Mrs. Amyot is a great success in the West once the narrator recommends her, and the ways in which western college professors collude with the narrator to provide her with audiences cause the narrator to wince at "the vast machinery of fraud that I had set in motion" (86). The fact that Wharton sets this questionable endeavor in the West suggests at best an undiscerning and naïve good nature on the part of Mrs. Amyot's western audience and at worst a lack of good sense and taste, and neither naïveté nor bad taste, we are led to believe, are qualities of the eastern audience.

10 In Wharton's 1899 story "A Journey," the West also functions as cultural wasteland. The protagonist and her husband move to Colorado for his health, but she despises living there without anyone to admire her good taste, "to wonder at the good match she had made, or to envy her the new dresses and the visiting cards" (66). Even when the couple returns East because the man is dying, the woman finds this unpleasant circumstance preferable to western life, and until the train actually leaves the station, she worries

"that they would never get away" (67). The woman is distraught when her husband dies on the train heading East and covers up the fact for fear that she will be put off the train with his dead body at some backwater station. Yet Wharton represents her emotional distress over her husband's death as only slightly more intense than her loathing of Colorado or the fear that she would not escape, emphasizing her negative attitude toward her western exile.

11 Mary Boyne in "Afterward" (1910) has similarly negative feelings about her almost fourteen-year exile from New York in "the soul-deadening ugliness of a Middle Western town" (832), "where the amenities of living could be obtained only at the cost of efforts as arduous as her husband's professional [engineering] labours" (840). The "prodigious windfall of the Blue Star Mine" allows them the means and leisure to escape and enjoy life (832), but the negative effects of midwestern capitalistic enterprise plague them even once they are living in a rented English country house, first by way of an article from the *Waukesha Sentinel* describing a suit brought against Boyne by his colleague Robert Elwell in connection with the Blue Star windfall (840-41), and then in the form of Elwell's ghost who comes for Boyne (844). After Boyne's disappearance, Mary pieces together the story of his business deal with Elwell, which was not quite "straight," according to Boyne's business associate, Parvis (854). Parvis's description of how Boyne cashed in on Elwell's tip casts a "lurid glare" over the Blue Star episode (855) and the "sensational" nature of a *Sentinel* article about Elwell's widow seeking financial aid (857) does little to lessen the story's scandal. Similarly, Wharton subtly characterizes both the lurid and the sensational as western forces in her depiction of the Bunner sisters' milieu, and the taint of negative influence from western or midwestern capitalistic enterprise also appears in that story.

12 Wharton sometimes represents such western deficiencies through her depiction of *nouveau riche* western characters. Referring in *A Backward Glance* (1934) to the "successive upheavals," which by World War I had destroyed society's "frame-work" and obliterated the manners and customs of old New York, Wharton marks the first of such upheavals as the infiltration in the 1880s of "big money-makers from the West" (6). Wharton elaborates on this assertion in her autobiography when she includes an incident related to her by Clyde Fitch (who dramatized *The House of Mirth*), in which his secretary shows his ornate Connecticut country house, complete with Italian furnishings, to a "newly-rich Western couple":

> [T]he husband had never heard of the *sette cento* (or perhaps of Italy) and was puzzled and put off by the furniture. [. . .] In one bedroom there was a delicately carved and gilded four-poster, hung with old brocade, its tester decorated with amorous allegories. This was the show room of the house, but the husband said he'd never seen a bed like that, and what the devil could anybody do with it? The scandalized secretary replied that Mr. Fitch had brought it back from Venice, and considered it his best piece; and the wife, to disguise her husband's ignorance, hastily remarked: "Why, I think it's a perfectly lovely bed! Can't you just see one of those old monks in it?" (163-64)

13 The husband's lack of appreciation for the piece coincides with the similar lack of taste in many of Wharton's newly-rich western characters that would appear in her twentieth-century fiction. For example, in "Charm Incorporated" (1934), Nadeja Targatt's brother, Boris Kouradjine, marries Mamie Guggins of Rapid Rise, Oklahoma in a match that pairs her family's industrial dynasty with the Kouradjines' status as Eastern European dignitaries (666). Wharton emphasizes the western *nouveaux riches'* lack of cultural capital, however, when Mamie Guggins's considerable fortunes fail to

rehabilitate the Kouradjines' tenuous social status, especially in the eyes of Najeda's husband, James Taggart, for whom the match emphasizes his sense of superiority over Nadeja's needy and uncultured siblings. Wharton launches a similar critique against such cultural paucity in *The Custom of the Country*, when Raymond de Chelles takes Undine Spragg, daughter of newly rich Midwesterners, to task for her lack of cultural depth as an American, coming as she does from "towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry, and the people are as proud of changing as [the French] are of holding to what we have" (545). In this case, Wharton directs critique toward Americans in general, but because it is through her newly rich western protagonist, the stereotypes she employs have particular relevance for our understanding of her vision of the West.

14 Wharton constructs an image of western culture that is, in fact, less nuanced than that reflected in western popular and print culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In an 1895 travel sketch, "Galveston, Texas, in 1895," Stephen Crane argues that travelers insisting on "radical differences between Eastern and Western life have created a generally wrong opinion" (706). Tara Penry notes that nineteenth-century western periodicals "dismantle binary myths of a literate East and preliterate West by demonstrating the westward spread of US print culture" (49); in fact, Barbara Cloud observes that late nineteenth-century U.S. Census data show some areas of the West to be more literate than the general population of the U.S. (13). Penry argues that like their eastern counterparts, western periodicals emphasized the development of a distinctly American intellectual tradition and through sentimental discourse promoted middle-class values such as domesticity and piety (53-54). Further, western periodicals often were more sophisticated than eastern publications in their approach to dialect materials according to Penry. By 1875, when the *Atlantic Monthly* was serializing Twain's Mississippi pieces, national eastern magazines used local color sketches and dialect stories "as metonyms for the regions they describe." But because "western periodicals assume[d] literacy for their western audience, dialect narratives in this context [... represented] some combination of history, humor, and description of a social class below the implied reader. Western periodicals show[ed] their region as a space occupied by multiple social classes speaking a variety of dialects over time" (60). The West that Wharton imagines in stories such as "The Pelican," "A Journey," or "Afterward" relies on the metonymic, and thus stereotypical, strategies of the national eastern magazines rather than the more complex cultural perspective of western publications.

15 In her physical description of Ann Eliza in "Bunner Sisters," Wharton reveals her reliance on such metonymic strategies. Although the sisters' shop is described as "a shrunken image of their earlier ambitions" (167), we learn that sometimes "among their greyer hours there came one not bright enough to be called sunny, but rather of the silvery twilight hue which sometimes ends a day of storm" (167). As the story begins, Ann Eliza is enjoying one of these twilight days. She has put on her best "double-dyed and triple-turned black silk" (168) in honor of her sister, Evelina's, birthday, and in her holiday mood, "a faint tinge of pink still lingered on her check-bones, like the reflection of sunset which sometimes colours the west long after the day is over" (168). Although Ann Eliza does not enjoy many sunny hours in her eastern and cloistered New York existence, on her best days, the darker "twilight" East contrasts with the glowing "sunny" West lingering in her cheeks, recalling the sunsets of the

Hudson River School artists evoked at the beginning of the story. Some of these works, such as Albert Bierstadt's *Sunset in the Yosemite Valley* (1868), presented what Angela Miller has termed "operatic views" of the American West and, in a Civil War context rife with social and political division, "promis[ed] a renewal of national hopes with landscapes of heroic and unfamiliar dimensions" (205).

16 As prospects for marriage and livelihood disappear for Ann Eliza, it becomes clear that any sunset colors lingering in her face are a reflection of opportunities long past rather than a promise of renewal. Ann Eliza's predicament is similar to that which Wharton imagined a year earlier for the protagonist in her first short story "Mrs. Manstey's View" (1891). Both stories take place in urban settings emphasizing the naturalistic detritus of city streets. Similar to the squalor of the Bunner sisters' street, on Mrs. Manstey's street, "the ash-barrels lingered late on the sidewalk and the gaps in the pavement would have staggered a Quintus Curtius" (1), and while some neighboring yards are green and welcoming, her view also takes in "stony wastes, with grass in the cracks of the pavement and no shade in spring save that afforded by the intermittent leafage of the clothes-lines" (2). Into this depressing vista, Wharton inserts the image of the western sunset to characterize Mrs. Manstey's stage of life and her prospects. The narrator tells us that Mrs. Manstey prefers "the narrowing perspective of far-off yards" when "at twilight, [...] the distant brown-stone spire seemed melting in the fluid yellow of the west." At these moments, she "lose[s] herself in vague memories of a trip to Europe, made years ago, and now reduced in her mind's eye to a pale phantasmagoria of indistinct steeples and dreamy skies" (3). We learn that the "fluid yellow" of the western sunset points toward Mrs. Manstey's tenuous relationship with her indifferent daughter, now married and living in California, never visiting, and seldom writing (1). In another rare appearance of California in her short fiction near the end of her career, Wharton designates the state as the place to which Kate Spain retreats after the Lizzie Borden-esque scandal of her father's death in "Confession" (1936), paralleling its use in "Mrs. Manstey's View" as a western space to which cruel daughters retreat after abandoning (or worse yet, murdering) their parents. The western sunset further reminds Mrs. Manstey of a bygone trip to Europe, now indistinct as a memory of "dreamy skies" less filled with promise than with nostalgia for what is lost. Wharton employs sunset imagery in both stories to emphasize the women's fading lives and shrinking opportunities.

17 However, both Mrs. Manstey and Ann Eliza seem quite content with their circumstances, despite the limited scope of their material and emotional lives. Not until their familiar New York lives are permanently disrupted do they experience debilitating changes, which are represented in relation to western space and culture. The change wrought by Herman Ramy's presence in the Bunner sisters' lives is felt well before he and Evelina are married and move to St. Louis. Ann Eliza instigates the acquaintance with Ramy when she buys Evelina's birthday clock from him, and, after visiting the sisters to repair the clock, he begins to frequent their flat. One evening, he calls unannounced as Ann Eliza and Evelina are listening to their neighbor, Miss Mellins, relate tales of crime and scandal fueled by her reading of magazines such as the *Police Gazette* or *Fireside Weekly* (184). Although such periodicals would have represented questionable sources of information, the Bunner sisters tolerate the tales and Ann Eliza exhibits "a ripple of sympathy" for Miss Mellins's fantastic story of the circumstances surrounding her birth (185). According to Penry, the *Police Gazette* was among the national eastern periodicals in the nineteenth century that "discovered the

profitability of a timeless West" and promoted the mythology of its violence in its pages (61). In this context, Miss Mellins represents a further source of the western forces that threaten the sisters' peaceful existence.

18 Upon Mr. Ramy's arrival, the romance that Ann Eliza attaches to his presence is undermined by Miss Mellins's more lurid version of his intentions toward Evelina. Throughout the narrative, Ann Eliza constructs romantic narratives to accompany her shopping excursions, including her visits to Ramy's shop, and as she relishes her memory of these exciting and often terrifying episodes long after the incidents are over, it becomes clear that she depends upon these narratives to exert control over the city's disorder and also over her life and circumstances. When Miss Mellins meets Ramy, however, she remarks that there will soon be a wedding (187), an unwelcome observation that disrupts Ann Eliza's romantic life narrative and causes her first pangs of jealousy toward Evelina (resulting in her criticism of Evelina's appearance [187]), a sign of the drastic changes that Ramy will introduce into their lives. Ramy's presence and stories have already altered the sisters' life narratives irreversibly, as they come to rely on his opinion and on the romance and drama of his struggles and life story to add excitement to their own (188), but Miss Mellins's view of the passion brewing between Ramy and Evelina, in the context of the sensationalism promoted by the *Police Gazette*, brings Ann Eliza her first real emotional pain. As a purveyor of western stereotype, the crime magazine also serves as harbinger for the further pain that western forces will inflict upon Ann Eliza.[3] Although she refuses Ramy's surprise marriage proposal later in the story, and thus chooses the stability and order of her unmarried existence rather than the turmoil suggested by Miss Mellins's sensational interpretation of marriage and romance, these negative forces eventually overwhelm her, nonetheless.

19 Further, as "Bunner Sisters" moves toward its conclusion, the West asserts itself as a negative capitalistic force much like the force characterized by Wharton in "Afterward" and in agreement with her belief that old New York society had been infiltrated by *nouveau riche* western capitalists (*Backward Glance* 6). In "Bunner Sisters," Wharton maintains this link between the forces of capitalism and the erosion of genteel culture. Initially in "Bunner Sisters," St. Louis seems to figure as a city of opportunity, in accordance with the popular commentary by Brockett and others to which I referred earlier. Even though the city triggers the disruption of Ann Eliza and Evelina's quiet and orderly life, it also represents the place where Ramy and Evelina can begin their new life together and Ramy is offered a new start in the clock business. Neither character fares well in this western space, however: Evelina is abandoned, loses a baby, and is forced into the streets to beg for her living, and Ramy loses his position. The negative endings of these marriage and business plots undermine St. Louis as a symbol of progress.

20 For Ann Eliza, on the other hand, Evelina's marriage means the loss of the shop, for she cannot provide customers with the stylish items that Evelina produced. Although Ann Eliza's existence as a shopkeeper seems claustrophobic and limited, it grows even more limited after her sister's departure for the West, particularly as capitalistic forces exert increasingly negative pressure on the shop's dwindling business. Like the western forces that Wharton sees as threatening old New York, some of this negative force in "Bunner Sisters" comes from the industrial West. As a shorthand for the culture-threatening forces of capitalism, Ramy's supposedly reinvigorated career in the clock industry[4] in St. Louis destroys Ann Eliza's contented life with Evelina. Somewhat

similarly in "Mrs. Manstey's View," capitalist enterprise in the form of the expansion of the neighboring boardinghouse (which will block Mrs. Manstey's precious view) threatens to obliterate Mrs. Manstey's peaceful existence, a way of life that is so much a part of her that when she considers moving from the flat that she has occupied for seventeen years, the narrator notes that she might as well be "flayed alive" and "she was not likely to survive either operation" (5). Although the boardinghouse expansion is not explicitly western, it combines with other factors in the story, including the estranged daughter in California and the western sunsets that represent Mrs. Manstey's dwindling opportunities, to prefigure the obliteration of Mrs. Manstey's life, quite literally with her death at the end.

21 The images at the end of "Bunner Sisters" similarly underscore the threats of western industrialism. In order to cover the shame of Evelina's situation, Ann Eliza concocts a story that Ramy has gone West on business (236), an image which recalls and anticipates Wharton's use of the West as representative of desertion in "Mrs. Manstey's View" and "Confession." With Evelina's eventual death and the failure of the shop, Ann Eliza goes into the streets of New York to find employment. However, much like earlier ventures out of the shop (to shop or to go on outings with Ramy, Evelina, and Miss Mellins), this outing also proves more terrifying, confusing, and exhausting than liberating. Ann Eliza enters a shop advertising the availability of a position as saleswoman and finds it to be as cheerful and thriving as she and Evelina had once envisioned their shop, but she learns that the position is intended for "a bright girl: stylish, and pleasant manners. [...] Not over thirty [...] and nice looking" (246). As she returns to the street to find another help wanted sign, the language of the story implies that she may not find employment in the new cultural landscape of the city that privileges youth and beauty over experience: the city, "under the fair spring sky, seemed to throb with the stir of innumerable beginnings" (246). The positive connotations of the spring imagery and the suggestion of new beginnings could imply renewal, or at least survival, for Ann Eliza, but the fact that she faces "innumerable beginnings" also suggests the arduous work of her economic survival and emphasizes the tenuous status of the unmarried older woman in late nineteenth-century urban consumer culture. In the context of the ways in which Wharton employs western imagery in her short fiction, the ending's emphasis on multiple and uncontrollable forces gestures toward the foreclosing of opportunity and hope, much like the negative influence suggested by the personal, cultural, and economic disorder issuing from western space and enterprise in Wharton's other work. Her inability to resolve the effects of such social forces for her women characters in the more aesthetically controlled form of her short fiction demonstrates the power of these forces in women's lives.

22 The 1890 U.S. Census declared the end of unsettled land, and Frederick Jackson Turner analyzed the significance of the closing frontier on American culture just one year after Wharton wrote "Bunner Sisters." Critics such as Mary Lawlor and David Murdoch have noted the nostalgia that Turner's frontier thesis generated in American literature—immediately after 1893 in the works of the American naturalists, according to Lawlor, and in the early twentieth century, according to Murdoch. "Bunner Sisters" is perched on the cusp of this changing attitude toward the American West and frontier, and although, unlike Frank Norris, Jack London, Stephen Crane, or Willa Cather,[5] Wharton would not explicitly demonstrate this nostalgia in western novels, she engages with the meanings and implications of western space in significant ways. Like the eastern

periodicals, Wharton seems to "fr[eeze] the West into a timeless myth" (Penry 61), but her use and characterization of that myth also differ dramatically from what we find in eastern print culture. Indeed, she represents the West in her short fiction much less nostalgically than her contemporaries and in a way that we might even consider counter-cultural in its vision of the threat that the West's unregulated cultural spaces pose to women's lives and relationships.

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NOTES

1. As I have argued elsewhere, critical opinion about Wharton's strengths in short fiction has been mixed and inconsistent in reviews, critical studies, and even in Wharton's personal correspondence on the subject ("Critical Reception" 118-19).
2. Sarah Whitehead finds an interesting correlation between Wharton's narrative strategies and the restrictive material frames imposed upon Wharton's short stories by the magazines in which they are published. She suggests that "Wharton's narrative strategies effectively subvert the material, editorial and readership contexts in which they were published" (43). Barbara A. White argues somewhat differently that Wharton might have achieved more in the short story form "had her conception of form been less rigid" (4).
3. The sisters' well-worn copy of Longfellow contrasts with the stories of the *Police Gazette.* Barbara Hochman argues that while Longfellow's poetry would represent "the high point of culture and gentility" for the Bunner sisters (129), in light of Wharton's 1903 essay "The Vice of Reading," we can be sure that Wharton would have condoned Miss Mellins's reading of "recognized trash" ("Vice of Reading" 514) over the Bunner sisters' "naïve and inordinate adulation of high-cultural forms" such as Longfellow's poetry (Hochman 131).
4. See Jennifer Fleissner for a discussion of how "the strict clock time of industrial capitalism" (524) represents the biological forces influencing the characters, especially time's effect on the sisters' reproductive power.
5. See Mary Lawlor for a discussion of these writers in the context of nostalgia for the West.

ABSTRACTS

Dans ses romans, Wharton raconte parfois un voyage vers l'Ouest américain, ou de l'Ouest vers l'Est, pour évoquer la confrontation entre ses personnages féminins et les normes culturelles. Lily Bart part avec les Gormer en Alaska pour se dérober aux regards extérieurs. Undine Spragg part vers l'Ouest pour mettre fin à son mariage avec Ralph Marvell en divorçant à Reno, ce qui souligne le lien entre la liberté des territoires de l'Ouest américain et la liberté croissante des femmes. L'Ouest américain joue un rôle assez différent dans les nouvelles. Mon analyse, centrée sur « Bunner Sisters », s'appuie aussi sur d'autres nouvelles donnant de l'Ouest une image négative : c'est le domaine du matérialisme grossier des nouveaux riches, un monde ignorant totalement les usages de la société polie, un domaine en proie aux scandales et à l'illégalité. Dans « Bunner Sisters », l'Ouest est un monde où les possibilités semblent se restreindre, vision fort éloignée de l'image nostalgique de l'Ouest des contemporains de Wharton. On peut même dire

que la nouvelliste prend le contrepied de cette vision en montrant que la liberté de l'espace culturel de l'Ouest constitue une menace pour la vie des femmes.

AUTHORS

GARY TOTTEN

Gary Totten is Associate Professor of English at North Dakota State University and President of the Edith Wharton Society (2011-2013). He is the editor of *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture* (U of Alabama P, 2007) and has published articles on Wharton and her contemporaries.